

# El Toro Road work hurting businesses

Owners of stores and restaurants say they have lost customers and revenue from ongoing construction.

BY RITA FREEMAN  
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Bakers Square on El Toro Read painted "Open during construction" on its side windows to remind customers the restaurant isn't closing.

The Buy "N" Save discount store closed Dec. 31 after business dropped more than half.

The \$3.00 Tan salon remains busy despite relentless customer complaints about congestion.

Torn-up trenches, reduced traffic lanes and closed entrances and exits are deterring drivers from traveling on El Toro Road in Lake Forest. Some businesses on the north side of the bottlenecked thoroughfare are experiencing a crunch in sales and a loss of customers avoiding the congestion.

Many store owners remain hopeful, however, that they can regain their clientele and boost their revenue when the \$27 million expansion — as well as the construction of The Orchard at Saddleback and the demolition of the former Kmart building — is complete, and the once-bleak corridor becomes a destination spot in Lake Forest.

City officials say the project is on schedule to be done at the end of October.

"I have every expectation that is going to happen," Bakers Square manager Esperanza Ruiz said. "They are putting up with a lot. They are expecting it to be successful."

Some business owners noticed a decrease when construction started about six months ago. Drivers could not enter the Bell Tower Plaza in the first phase of construction since the three access points were closed off for work. Businesses also lost phone service for about a week in January when rain flooded underground maintenance holes.

Some stores have adapted. Socorro Galvan, owner of Saddleback Valley Tailoring in the Twin Peaks Plaza, delivers altered clothing to her clients, many of them senior citizens,

who do not want to grapple with the traffic.

Galvan also placed a sign notifying customers that items would be ready after 3 p.m. so they wouldn't have to deal with construction traffic.

Assistant City Manager Mark Pulone said progress on El Toro continues as scheduled despite more than 20 days of delay from storms.

Lanes have been reduced from three to two while crews finish placing utility lines underground.

Pulone said roadwork on the north side of El Toro is expected to be completed by the second week in May. Then

crews will begin digging up curbs on the south side, where construction should move quickly since there are fewer utilities to relocate.

When the road is completed, drivers can expect to see an extra lane in each direction, landscaped medians and walkways, and additional left- and right-turn lanes.

Meanwhile, to accommodate customers and to attract new ones, stores and restaurants are offering coupons and construction promotions.

Still, some owners are concerned.

Saddleback Patio & Fireside owner Mitch Volman is preparing to enter his busiest season. In the next 3½ months he expects to earn half his annual revenue. The outdoor-furniture-store owner at Twin Peaks said up to now the loss of customers is "moderate," but the impact could worsen if roadwork is not completed soon.

For others, business is returning.

"When customers call, we can tell them they can get in and out of the center," Bernard Rissen, a salesman at Pal's Sewing Machines, said. "We've got all three entrances, so I don't think it's too bad."

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**"We've been here for 30 years. I don't think it's going to kill us."**

GRACE BJORNSTAD  
BELL TOWER FLORIST

**"When the exits were closed, business was nonexistent."**

BERNARD RISSEN  
SALESMAN AT PAL'S  
SEWING MACHINES